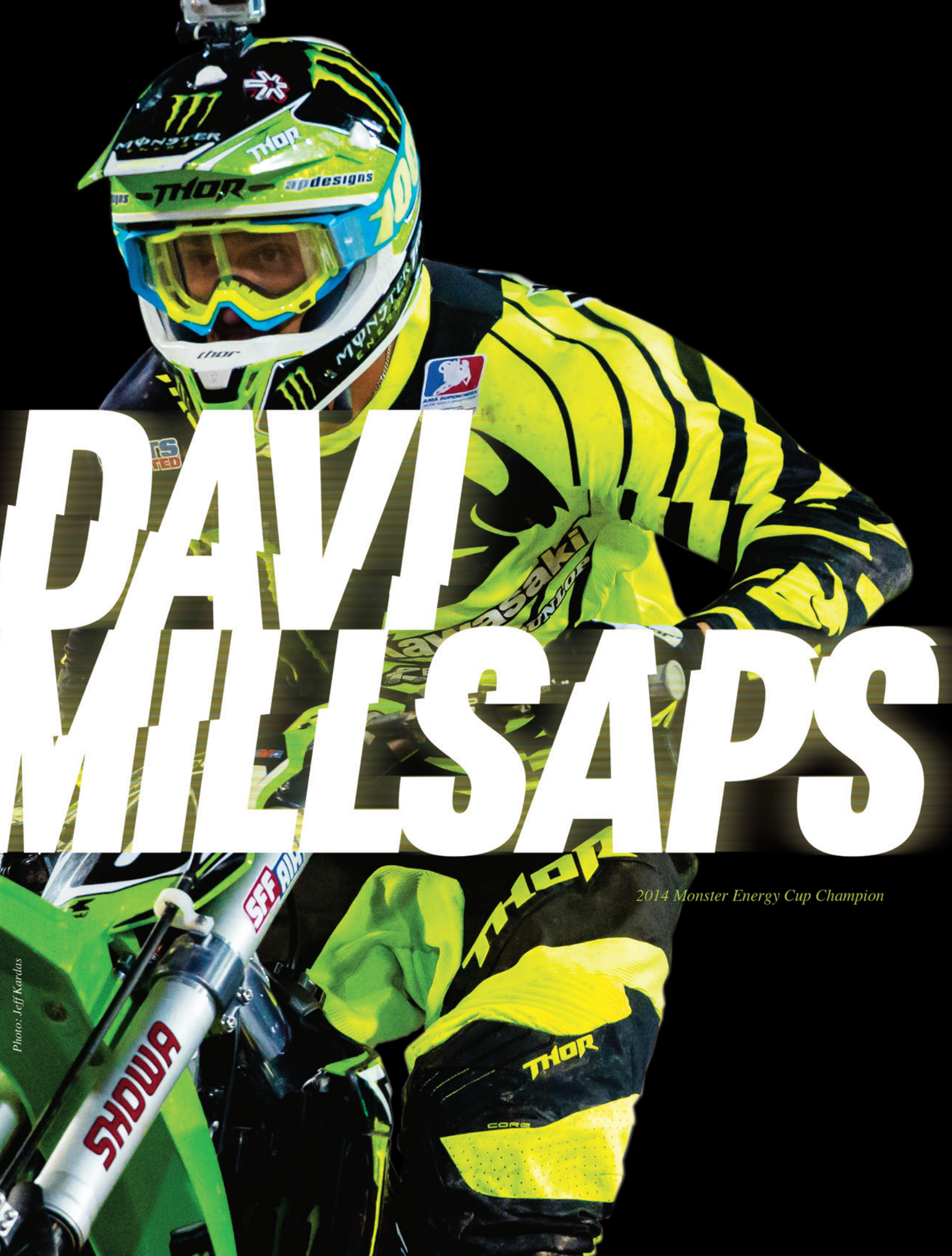


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Serenity in Spain...?

The quiet town of Berga in Catalunya was disturbed by the blast of Ryan Villopoto and Tyla Rat-tray's factory Monster Energy Kawasakis last week in the KRT duo's latest test ahead of the 2015 FIM MXGP World Championship. RV then headed to the FIM Gala at Jerez before jetting back to the USA. The next time Europeans see the multi AMA Cham-pion could be in his first race on the continent since the 2011 Motocross of Nations...

Photo by Graeme Brown/Kawasaki





MotoGP

Crouching Crutchlow...

MotoGP is now into a winter slumber of sorts with only Open (or nearly Open) teams taking advantage of their liberty with regards to off-season testing before Christmas. Of all the new sights at Valencia just as the last OTOR went online Cal Crutchlow familiarising himself with his third MotoGP machine in three years as part of the LCR Honda crew was one of the bigger changes with Suzuki, Jack Miller and Aprilia also on show

Photo by Honda Pro Images







AMA-MX

Eli throws a warning...

Hitting the whoops with the strength and confidence that delivered two comprehensive victories in France and Italy Geico, Honda's Eli Tomac proved his mettle in two different supercross meetings and just seven weeks before the AMA SX series begins at Anaheim

Photo by Nuno Laranjeira







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ABOUT FACE

MOTOGP TURNED A LITTLE BLUER – IN THE AESTHETIC SENSE – AT VALENCIA WHERE THE Paddock BECAME HOME TO FOUR FACTORY TEAMS ONCE AGAIN. SUZUKI’S OVERDUE RETURN TO GRAND PRIX WAS HARDLY SMOOTH BUT THE FLURRY OF ACTIVITY AROUND 2015 RIDERS ALEIX ESPARGARO AND MAVERICK VIÑALES ON MONDAY MORNING AFTER THE FINAL SPRINT OF THE SEASON WAS SYMBOLIC OF THEIR RACE TO COME BACK TO THE HIGHEST LEVEL 54 YEARS AFTER THEY FIRST WHEELED A SUZUKI MACHINE ONTO A GP GRID. WE SPOKE TO PROJECT LEADER SATORU TERADA AND TEAM MANAGER DAVIDE BRIVIO ON THE EFFORT, EXCITEMENT AND DOUBTS OF RE-MOUNTING A WORKS EFFORT IN MOTOGP...

By Adam Wheeler

Photos by www.suzuki-racing.com/Martin Heath

When a sweaty Ernst Degner climbed off his RM62 at the Isle of Man in June of 1962 and looked down at the little 50cc engine that had just carried him and Suzuki to their first FIM Grand Prix win, there is no conceivable way that the German could have imagined the influence a computer would have in trying to repeat the feat over half a century later.

The path of technical progress in racing is as staggering and as daunting as the island mountain road itself.

There are some worried faces in the compact Suzuki garage at Valencia. Randy De Puniet, Suzuki's test rider and wading through a MotoGP swansong at the Ricardo Tormo, is frustrated. The team have some issues with the GSX-RR; a condensed and fetching motorcycle in the initial stages of development and with the potential – Suzuki hope – to soon deliver their first GP silverware since 2008. Two blown engines, reduced top speed compared to the competition (the Suzuki does not even show in the top ten of the speed traps along the near-1km straight) and several other gremlins are impeding a welcome return to the top flight for the brand. Apparently it is all in the algorithms. Team Manager Davide Brivio is concerned but remains stoic.

Valencia is not a grand reawakening for the firm that has six premier class rider titles (and seven constructors crowns) in a twenty-four year spell of the sport from 1976 to 2000 and with renowned winners such as Barry Sheene, Marco Lucchinelli, Franco Uncini, Kevin Schwantz and Kenny Roberts Jnr in the saddle of their formidable two-stroke technology. Instead it is a first toe-dip for the Italian/Japanese crew and words and warnings like

'homework', 'notes', 'winter work' are bandied around all weekend for curious press eager to see just how much catching-up Suzuki have to make since they departed MotoGP at the same circuit back in 2011.

"Yeah, leaving MotoGP was a difficult time [for Suzuki]," opines Project Leader Satoru Terada. "We suspended the racing project but on the other hand stopping racing meant we could concentrate fully on the bike. To race you need many parts and resources but being in the background meant we could be faster and more efficient and just concentrate on one thing. We completely changed the engine configuration. Suzuki have a lot of experience of the inline four engine for production but to totally rework it took time and we had to learn a lot."





SUZUKI IN MotoGP





Martin Heath



Suzuki left a MotoGP scene that had bounced from 800 to 1000cc regulations without a podium result in three seasons of competition and had downsized to just one rider representation, in the form of young Spaniard Alvaro Bautista. "I think, by the end, Suzuki was actually not so bad," assesses Davide Brivio, a man with fourteen years experience in MotoGP and another eleven in World Superbike and who has been in charge of Suzuki's resurrection as a works team since April 2013. "With only Bautista on the track he was making the top five-six and I don't think he achieved much more when he switched brands in the years after. I don't think the bike was so bad. With this new project I can see that the whole company is behind it and I see the management are keeping track of what is happening. To step out of competition is an easy thing...and nobody forces you to come back. The company made the decision to return and make a big investment in MotoGP at a difficult time and this shows commitment. I hope this will be translated into a big effort and big impact. Now we have to understand where we are and take notes and cover three years of absence."

"I feel that MotoGP in the last three or four years has become a very strong competition and the manufacturers with their technology and the riders have gotten to an even higher level," the Italian continues. "This is a time period in which Suzuki has been absent. We have to recover the initial gap and then the normal gains that you make when you are in the heat of competition. We are very enthusiastic but we know we have a difficult job ahead."

Left: Suzuki's efforts in the four-stroke MotoGP era yielded little in the way of success with just one victory; at Le Mans in 2007 by Chris Vermeulen

Suzuki are wild-cards at Valencia and the outing with De Puniet – that would prematurely end with a transmission-shifting issue in the race on Sunday – is merely a preview for the first 2015 work with their new Spanish recruits on Monday. The timing is strange. Suzuki will have just one season of 'Factory Open' status in 2015 before the sport switches to standardised electronics and even new controlled tyres from Michelin rather than Bridgestone. Brivio explains some of the background and tries to offer a rationale for the 'floating' status of Suzuki in MotoGP.

"The original plan was different," he says. "We were going to use 2013 to prepare and then race this year. Then there were sudden changes in the regulations, especially with the electronics, and we had to develop new systems for the compulsory Magneti Marelli ECU. It is a big job and we couldn't make it in a few months. So it turned into a long period of preparation. It doesn't mean that we are now ready. It means that we are just trying to keep up with performance and times because the competition is also making steps forward."

Suzuki tested with 33 year old De Puniet at least six times this year as part of their plan to drop into the 2015 'gap' year as close as possible to the Hondas, Yamahas and resurging Ducatis. "It would have been difficult to delay another year," continues Brivio. "In some ways it would have been better to come back in 2016 with the new technical rules but if you look at the reality then we didn't want that extra delay. 2015 means the chance to continue development with our own electronics and also we had to look at the riders' market because we were around at a time where everybody had the contract up and with some possible movements going on."

"We just wanted to start as soon as possible," he emphasises. "It is important to start and then we just follow the regulations, so we are now in the same situation as everybody else. We go factory with some concessions – like Ducati's situation now – so we have our own software and the possibility to use 24 litres of fuel, soft tyres, twelve engines and free development of the engines. This is just for one year and is a big help to start. 2016 will bring a big change for everybody and will bring another opportunity. Maybe more equality to the competition."

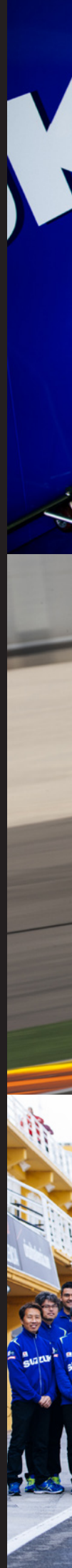
Terada is a little more direct. "We are not back because of the regulation but because our company decided that this is the right time to return to MotoGP."

For now the electronics and complicated inner workings of the young GSX-RR are proving troublesome. "Of course the electronics is the biggest area of development and something we are still working through," says Terada. "We used a different system before with Mitsubishi. We have to change many things to implement the right engine control with Magneti Marelli. We are entering MotoGP with factory status but we only have one year so it is very hard. We know that the regulations are changing and this is tricky for development. We have to discover things. Our bike is still a baby – not a child yet! It has potential but we might need to do many things in the next months."

"I think it is a very good bike now in terms of chassis and rideability," muses Brivio. "We have to recover a gap on the electronics side but we are relatively new with this. We also have to understand the pure engine performance and that is why we are here and to see our homework for the winter. I hope by the first

races of 2015 we will be into the 'normal job' of assessing ourselves against the competitors and finding the strong and weak points and developing in competition."

If the GSX-RR is going through a teething stage then there is one area in which Suzuki are resolutely mature and pack a lot of muscle. The combination of Espargaro and Viñales makes for a potent riding duo. Aleix already lapped quicker than De Puniet in the test days after the Grand Prix and was full of praise for the bike's handling and turning prowess; characteristics shared apparently by the championship-winning factory Hondas and part of the reason why Marc Marquez can make light work of his corner entry and general attack. "I think we have made the right choice for the riders. Maverick is getting stronger race by race and Aleix already has made a lot of races on different bikes," says Terada. "I'm happy," exults Brivio. "Espargaro has never been in a factory team. I like this sort of challenge because he is coming into something new and – at least in the beginning – he has to lead development of the bike. This is something he hasn't done before but I think he is ready for it. He is only twenty-five but already has experience in the class and in jumping from one team to another. He started from the base and I think he understands how big this opportunity is for him and because of that we have the same target."





SUZUKI IN MotoGP

"Maverick is a great talent and is one of the riders that can really be at the top in the future," he goes on. "Somebody argued that he has only had one year in Moto2, that it is not the right time for him and he should stay there and win more before jumping into MotoGP but from our point of view we wanted to take an opportunity. He liked the idea of racing for Suzuki and we did not want to lose the chance of having him with us. With Aleix, who is twenty-five, and Maverick, who is twenty next year, hopefully we have some riders with whom we can build up together. They can gain their own experience, we develop the bike and together we can get stronger and stronger."



Martin Heath

The next generation of the GSX-RR and the final structure of the team will both be firmly in place by the time MotoGP comes to life again next year in the heat of Sepang in Malaysia. Suzuki today is a world away from the 'Colledda' of the 1960s and the first bikes and vans that rolled off the ferry plates on the Isle of Man but one more aspect of their competitive existence remains up for debate. Will they keep the traditional blue and yellow for 2015 or is a main or title sponsor imperative? Terada says the outlook is without limits: "We are looking for a sponsor but if we cannot get a partner then we will continue in our colour. The Suzuki branding is very important for racing."





TERADA-SAN

What's your role and background in Suzuki?

I have been MotoGP Project leader since 2012. I've been at Suzuki since 1988 and my whole career has been spent in the racing department. I started on the two-stroke engine but then we switched to four-stroke and then to the latest version.

So you joined in the 1980 two-stroke glory days...

Yes and Kevin Schwantz is my hero! When I came to Suzuki we had just started his Suzuki career. He was very fast and sometimes crashed and sometimes the engine broke but he won many times. He always made a good show. I had a really good experience with him but to be honest the aerodynamics was not easy for us because he has very long arms and legs!

Did you have a favourite bike from that era? The Pepsi Suzuki or the Lucky Strike RGV?

For sure the 1993 Lucky Strike Championship-winning bike was a great one but I also like the 1995 version. The structure of the bike was very good and the construction was very different to before. We made good technical progress with that one.

The last title was in 2000 that famously saw the end of Suzuki and their two-stroke racing...

We stopped developing the two-stroke in 2001 so 2000 was the end. We were always working hard to get the best from the middle of the powerband. That was the struggle.

You are working directly with Davide Brivio. What does he bring to the job and the team?

His experience. He has been part of the MotoGP 'village' for a long time and he has done some great organisation for what is a new team. Everything is quite new but he knows many people in the paddock and it is very important.

BRIVIO-SAN

How did you end up in control of Suzuki's MotoGP effort?

I left this job [MotoGP] at the end of 2010 but I was working with Valentino [Rossi] directly and his personal business. I had a lot of fun working for and with him but I was missing this type of job in organising a team which is much more complicated and busy. It was great to have the opportunity to do it for a big company like Suzuki. I was quite surprised when they contacted me because there was nothing in place. They needed to organise a team but from zero because they were only developing the bike in Japan and had nothing else. It was exciting to build this from nothing. In the beginning we had to decide where to base the team and we didn't even have a single tool! Everything had to start and to make a factory effort for a company like Suzuki was 'wow'.

Did you have any reservations and were you aware of the racing heritage?

I wasn't scared. I was excited. It is a hard and difficult job but very rewarding because you have the possibility to organise something new - of course always in agreement with Suzuki - and explore some ideas. I have a lot of respect for what Suzuki has done so far in Grand Prix and it is a company that has won many titles. In the '80s - and this is something the new generations should know - Suzuki was dominating the 500cc class. They were probably one of the most advanced with the two-stroke technology and believed strongly in it. Suzuki is a company with a lot of history and experience in racing. And now we need to 'play the game' and the team is trying to develop state of the art technology, particularly with electronics and fuel-consumption.

What were the first things you had to do?

The first thing was to prepare the budget! It took a few days and a lot of discussion. I asked them to provide a lot more than what they were expecting to start the whole operation! It was also based on being a new team and trying to get into MotoGP at the best possible level. We are only at the beginning but organisation is a never-ending task. We have made the initial preparation because we came to Valencia and now we need to look at next year.

Is there pressure now? Suzuki also needs to rebuild an image as much as a racing effort...

We need to keep the company motivated and excited and even if it is difficult we need to do that with results. It is not easy because we have a situation in MotoGP now where there seem to be four riders that just play between them. Ducati has been struggling for a few years to get back to the top and this also tells





you about the difficulty of this job. The three factory teams could be said to have an advantage over us but there are also some satellite riders who have a lot of potential. Our job is to try and get closer and closer to this top group and hopefully be able to challenge them. I hope we can do it as soon as possible.

What's your view on MotoGP now and the way it has changed over the last few years?

I understand how the rules have developed because we have to face the reality over the economy. Maybe ten years ago there was no problem to make investments, buy a new truck, build new parts or make a big team presentation but nowadays the reality of the entire world has changed and the regulations are just a way to follow the reduced resources we have available. It was like an 'emergency' situation that needed to be addressed. I think we are looking for our final identity [as a series] and 2016 will be an important step. From

a pure sporting point of view I'd like to see it like it was twenty years ago, when it was much freer and we could just go racing. But times change and I actually think the new regulations to lower cost are also inviting new manufacturers to come in. For the public it will be better to have it simpler and it will be this way from 2016.

Moving from Yamaha to Suzuki did you find much of a change in the way the companies do things?

Many similarities...and the companies are actually located close together. It is funny because the engineers at one company will have a neighbour from the other! The culture is quite similar. I have seen Yamaha changing over the years and I have seen an evolution of the internal mentality to racing. It became more aggressive in a positive way, and maybe this is something that in Suzuki we also need to do. I hope so.

THE LIFE OF A MotoGP STAR...

By David Emmett

It's a pretty easy life being a motorcycle racer, right? Work four days a week for eighteen race weekends plus a few test days, and spend the rest of the time sitting at home, riding MX bikes, maybe a bit of mountain biking, and hanging out with friends. Fly around the world in business class, make piles of cash, and have your pick of the umbrella girls. Right?

Not quite. Though there isn't a single rider in the paddock who doesn't think that racing a motorcycle is the best job in the world (the one exception to that rule retired at the end of 2012, taking his world championships with him), they will all tell you that it takes a lot of commitment, desire, and above all hard work. The days they spend at the racetrack are just the tip of the iceberg. Underlying the visible success of a motorcycle racer are days, months, years of hard work, often for little or no money, often while having to earn some form of income on the side.

Becoming a professional motorcycle racer is incredibly tough, but it's actually the easiest part of the journey (of course, this is leaving aside the question of whether a rider who has to raise the funds to pay for their saddle can actually be considered a professional or not, but that is an even more sensitive area). Young athletes tend to rise to the top of their local and regional classes based largely on talent alone. It helps to have decent financial backing, naturally, but at that level, talent differentials are big enough to overcome equipment deficiencies.

That is not the case once you reach the best national series' and absolutely not the case at Grand Prix level. The differences in talent between the

fastest and the slowest Moto3 riders are small, the difference in performance lies elsewhere. Some of it is in the bike – the best teams are the ones who can extract the most performance from a very limited package – but more of it is in the riders themselves. It is in rider preparation, fitness and training, and in mental toughness.

The difference in fitness is visible in the timesheets. In the Moto3 race at Valencia, Jack Miller and Alex Marquez, the two men battling for the championship, were lapping just as fast on their final laps as they were in the first couple. Look outside the top twenty – at, say, Luca Grunwald, Hafiq Azmi, Gabriel Ramos, Matteo Ferrari – and they lose the best part of two seconds a lap throughout the race. Their fastest laps are usually within a second of the best of Miller and Marquez. Their slowest laps are three or more seconds off. Some of that may be down to tyre management but a lot of it is just down to fitness.

How fit do you have to be to ride a motorbike? At this level, very fit indeed. You have to be able to maintain your heart rate at around your lactate threshold – about 90% of your maximum heart rate, or the maximum physical intensity your body can manage – for at least 45 minutes. All the while, you have to be hyper aware of everything going on around you, maintain your reflexes at razor-sharp levels, muscle a motorcycle around, and suppress the fear reflexes every time you feel the front or rear end start to wash out. (That is a lot: most MotoGP riders are saving front-end slides on their knees three or four times a lap.) The fitter you are, the easier this whole thing is, and the more you have to spare at the end of the race.



Every successful racer spends many hours training. Those cool instagram pictures racers post of their bicycle rides? Those are no gentle trips exploring the local scenery. They are full-on sessions of two hours or more spent at full speed. Cal Crutchlow's training partner is Mark Cavendish, former cycling world champion and winner of twenty five Tour de France stages. Cavendish does not spare Crutchlow's feelings when the pair are out together; Cavendish is completing his own training schedule for his job as a professional cyclist, Crutchlow is expected to keep up. Crutchlow is not in any way unique in his training schedule, every top racer will complete a similar programme of physical preparation.

Even when out riding motorcycles, they are not just messing about on their bikes. Scott Redding's MX practice consists of a series of 45-minute sessions ridden at full intensity, pushing his body to the limits to accustom himself to the physical demands and stresses of a race. His former team-mate, and now Moto2 world champion Tito Rabat virtually lives in his motorhome, parked up at Almeria circuit. There, he spends the hour before the track opens in the morning lapping at record pace on his Kalex Moto2 bike, then the hour while the track is closed for lunch doing the same thing. He does this almost every day, and in between, he is out running, cycling, boosting his fitness further.

Once the season is over, the riders can back off their training programmes. Only for a week or so, though: training starts again after the briefest of breaks to recover after a long campaign of competition. Often, the hiatus is enforced as a result of surgery, riders scheduling operations to fix

problems created during the year, or to remove metalwork inserted to shore up broken bones in previous terms. After a few days of reduced activity, they are hard at it once again.

Woe betide if you win a championship, though. You have to fit the same training schedule into the scarce free hours you have once your sponsors are finished with you. The period immediately after the season has ended is the time the companies that financed your title assault come for their pound of flesh. Since Valencia, and the three-day test which followed it, Marc Marquez has visited Repsol near Madrid, made a video for the Spanish newspaper El Pais, been feted in his home town of Cervera, been flown to Japan for a tribute by Honda, shot another video for one of his sponsors, been to Madrid again to meet the King of Spain, and has just been back to Jerez for the FIM awards. And he isn't finished yet.

Of course, Marc Marquez will be paid handsomely for his trouble, just about enough for most people to retire on. But he has to go through it all again next year, with more media pressure, more meetings with sponsors, more interviews with journalists like me, asking the same idiotic questions over and over again. All that eats into his time to train, to gain the fitness and fine tune the bike handling skills he will need if he is to compete for a third MotoGP title in a row. Each success brings more commitments, and less free time. Time to relax, or just goof off doing something he enjoys is increasingly scarce. Being a professional motorcycle racer is the best job in the world. But it is very far from being easy.



LOOK-ON HOLD-ON

ITALIAN FLAIR AND PERFORMANCE ARE THE HALLMARKS OF MV'S LATEST VERSIONS OF THE BRUTALE AND DRAGSTER. ROLAND CHECKED HIS PERSONAL FASHION TASTES AND THEN HELD ON FOR THE RIDE. HERE'S A VERDICT ON A SET OF SUMPTUOUS TWO-WHEELED TREATS...

By Roland Brown
Photos by Milagro

MV AGUSTA BRUTALE RR & DRAGSTER RR



TEST

MV Agusta seems to have discovered the secret to success as a manufacturer of high-end Italian bikes: push the limits of style as well as performance. The firm from Varese in northern Italy began 2014 by releasing the Dragster 800, a more dramatic version of the naked Brutale 800 triple featuring a cut-down seat and ultra-wide rear tyre. It howled out of showrooms as fast as the firm could produce it, despite a higher price.

Hence the latest, even more outrageous follow-up triples. The Brutale RR is a hotted-up version of the Brutale 800, featuring a more powerful engine and tweaked chassis. The Dragster RR updates the “standard” Dragster in similar fashion, and adds a pair of wire-spoked wheels like nothing seen before on a streetbike.

Both RR models share the latest version of MV's 798cc three-cylinder engine, which is revamped with a new intake system and more free-breathing exhaust. The result is increased midrange output and a 15bhp boost that takes the maximum to 140bhp — outstanding for what's essentially a middleweight.

The MVs also get updates to their electronic systems, which as before incorporate four riding modes and eight-way adjustable traction control. There's no change to the basic chassis layout, based on a compact steel-tube-and-aluminium frame and single-sided swing-arm, but suspension is firmed up slightly to cope with the extra performance. The Dragster RR gets new five-spoke cast wheels but the outstanding feature of either bike is arguably the Dragster RR's unmistakable pair of wire-spoked 17-inchers, which are produced by an Italian firm that normally supplies the car industry.



MV AGUSTA BRUTALE RR & DRAGSTER RR



TEST

There's never a dull moment on either of these powerful, responsive and firmly suspended machines. With that 140bhp output, ample midrange torque and short wheelbase, a tweak of the throttle is enough to send either MV leaping forward with its front wheel rising fast. Thankfully throttle control is helped by fuelling that is subtly updated and very good, apart from slightly uneven running at about 5000rpm in town. The gearbox has a new quick-shifter that is genuinely useful, allowing clutchless changes both up and down through the six-speed transmission.

The three main engine modes (Sport, Normal and Rain) can be selected very easily using the starter button. Even Normal gives seriously crisp throttle response and fierce acceleration, backed up by a soulful howl from the pipes down by your right boot as you flick through the box with the ride-by-wire throttle on the stop. Both bikes are deliciously lively and prone to launching into spontaneous wheelies even in second gear, which adds to the entertainment.



Of the two the Dragster is better in this respect because its short and distinctively shaped seat holds the rider well forward, with lots of weight over the front wheel. However the seat doesn't allow you to move around much or hang off the bike easily, which can be restricting in corners. And being unable to shift weight rearwards doesn't help under braking. The Brembo set-up gives powerful stopping but I found the ABS cutting in more often than expected, presumably because it was trying to prevent the rear from lifting.

Both MVs have compact chassis, with identical steel-and-aluminium frames, high quality suspension and racy geometry. With a shared 168kg dry weight figure they're both light too. That makes for agile and responsive handling but both triples' Marzocchi forks and Sachs shock are set up firm, which makes the bikes demanding and uncomfortable on bumpy roads.

The Dragster RR, with has slightly the firmer suspension of the two and a fatter, 200- instead of 180-section rear Pirelli, is affected more by poor road surfaces. At least both bikes have an adjustable steering damper, which helps keep the handlebars pointing in the right direction under acceleration.



MV AGUSTA BRUTALE RR & DRAGSTER RR







MV AGUSTA BRUTALE RR & DRAGSTER RR

Neither MV is remotely relaxing but both provide plenty of entertainment. And there's not much point in complaining about the Dragster's fat rear tyre compromising its agility, because like the cut-down seat it wasn't intended to be sensible or efficient. It was put there mainly to add to the bike's sense of drama and style, which it undoubtedly does.

In a way that shapely but less than practical Dragster rear end sums up MV Agusta's approach with these RR models, which is to work out what appeals most about their bikes and deliver even more of the same. There are plenty of rival roadsters that are more relaxing to ride, especially on a bumpy road; some are even faster too. Most naked bikes are also less expensive. The RRs cost roughly 20 per cent more than the standard triples (£11,599 for the Brutale RR and £13,299 for the Dragster RR in the UK), with the Dragster the more expensive of the two due mainly to those fancy wheels.

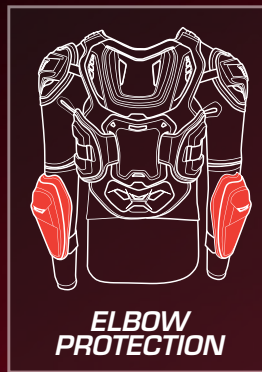
But those prices are hardly excessive by Italian superbike standards. And for anyone looking for style, straight-line performance, agility and charisma from a naked middleweight, the Dragster RR is the current state of the art and the slightly more sensible Brutale RR runs it a close second.



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NEW LINE

LEATT MADE SOME SERIOUS HEADWAY WITH THEIR EFFORTS TO BRING NECK PROTECTION INTO MOTOGP THIS YEAR BUT THEY HAVE NOW GONE BACK TO THE LAB TO HONE THE STX-RR BRACE INTO A DIFFERENT SPEC. WE SPOKE TO LEAD TECHNICIAN SCOTT MACFARLANE ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF ADDING TO THE ROAD RACING BIKE+RIDER 'PACKAGE' WHERE EVERY CENTIMETRE CAN COUNT...

**By Adam Wheeler
Photos by JP Acevedo**



Leatt's development work with their road race neck brace is one of those projects that seem to bubble away under cover. Especially as the South African firm never cease in terms of their output and have released off-road knee braces and launched a new helmet in the last six months. The STX-RR and STX-Road are products that already benefit from millions of dollars of investment and stringent scientific tests but their efforts to go to the next level and get an athlete 'braced' at the top level of Grand Prix racing is definitely a scheme that is 'in progress'. It accelerated in 2014 thanks to a link with the now-retired Colin Edwards and two public tests at Losail and Catalunya.

We caught up with Scott at the 2014 Intermot show in Germany to get the latest on when MotoGP riders might be able to add to their slim arsenal of protective wares...

You were working with Colin this year. That represented a step forwards for you...

Yes, we had a lot of data back from Colin after the initial tests in Qatar. We had some aerodynamic issues, so when we met up again at Catalunya we had a new brace to address those and it was a big success because he said he never felt it and couldn't 'hear' it. We still have an issue with the current development of road helmets not fitting to what we need for the back of the brace. As you can see with our own off-road helmet we are working on an optimum shape to fit with the brace but for the 'road' side of things we don't have that input in the industry. So we've gone back to the drawing board and we are looking at the technology to try and apply it in a totally different way; maybe as nothing you have seen so far. We

have looked at airbags but we don't believe this is the way forward. We are thinking about something more reactive and integral and then working with a manufacturer to get that technology put into the suits and road gear eventually. That is the ultimate aim.

What is your perspective on airbags?

For us it is always the worry about the reaction and the reaction time. We've heard rumours – I don't know if they are true or not – that sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't and we want a protection system that is always there to protect the rider and is not intrusive. We believe in that kind of approach rather than something that has to operate on a set of parameters.

So was it dispiriting to want to look at a re-design after the Catalunya test?

Actually no, that was not the attitude. In Leatt, especially the feedback from Chris [Dr Leatt, founder], we took the view that we made the research, collected the data, got some valuable input and now it was time to go back and put our thinking caps on. We have a team of designers that don't really think of limits; some ideas are 'way out there'! We were able to say 'let's look at it in a completely different way'. It might not be something you are expecting but it will be tested and then go through all the groundwork to get it 100% right.

That redesign...is it radical or are we talking about millimetre shaping?

No, we're talking radical. I cannot say too much but it will be totally different. We were pleased with what we achieved in our work with Colin but the next phase will be something more integrated and in-built.





Is it quite encouraging and motivating to walk into a place like MotoGP and be doing something that nobody else is doing?

Very much so. One of the joys in working for Leatt is that we are innovating. If everybody is doing things one way then nine times out of ten we will do something different because we have looked at it and said 'why is everyone going in this direction? Is everybody just copying and not understanding why?' We'll take data and try to answer those questions. We have the test department, the lab, the biomechanical engineers and through these resources we'll go to riders and teams with the information and the proof. Riders like data! You know that...

What about attitudes? From your first laps in Doha and then Catalunya what was the reaction to the brace being on the track?

There was interest. Neck protection and the whole chest and upper torso area is a big talking point at the moment in off-road and with only a few companies providing that service then professional racers are looking at products and know they are blocked out because of contracts. Riders were having a look [at them]. We were not just focusing on MotoGP. We also worked with the Haribo Starmix team in the UK. We have been tweaking away this year and got to the point where they are really happy with what they have. Of course they are not at the extreme aerodynamic level of MotoGP where nothing can be sticking out a few millimetres into the airflow. For the average consumer and the racer outside of high Grand Prix level the STX-RR is perfectly acceptable.

Has Leatt's position in off-road been a short-cut in terms of working with riders in road racing? Many also get on the dirt for training...
Absolutely. Leatt is very well known for its neck braces. If we were a new or totally unknown

company going into MotoGP then I think the doors would be closed or barely open. I think they know the brand well from off-road.

Have you been able to get some hard data from road racing? Where the brace has functioned well in a crash?

We have yeah. They have been tested on the test rigs but we have some examples [of damaged braces from the track] in the lab. The Haribo guys have crashed a few times this year. Compared to off-road you don't see this type of brutal wreckage to the brace. It is a different type of fall. There haven't been any complaints through a result of a crash...but we like listening to criticism and feedback!

So overall the first tests in MotoGP have been received well...

Very. Dorna have been very open-minded. If it is a subject of safety for the riders then they are keen and with Leatt's background in addressing sports injuries they know that it is not just some guy coming up with crazy ideas. The company is built on a medical and biomechanical background and is making innovative products. I think people see that.



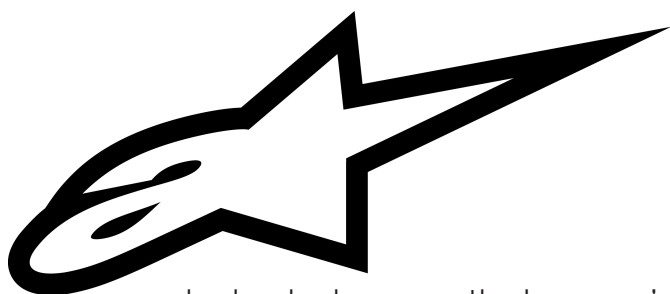


ALPINESTARS TECH-AIR STREET

TIME FOR AIR

By Adam Wheeler
Photos by Alpinestars

HONDAS AND YAMAHAS ASIDE ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2014 EICMA SHOW IN MILAN TOOK PLACE AWAY FROM THE BUSIER FIERA AND AT A CRASH TEST FACILITY WHERE ALPINESTARS SHOWED OFF THEIR **TECH-AIR STREET** SAFETY SYSTEM FOR THE FIRST TIME. IT WAS A MOMENTOUS OCCASION FOR THE ITALIAN COMPANY WITH ONE OF THEIR MOST IMPORTANT PROTECTIVE INNOVATIONS OF RECENT YEARS; THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DEVICE ONLY POSSIBLE THANKS TO MODERN ELECTRONICS AND SOFTWARE. WE ASKED MEDIA MANAGER JEREMY APPLETON TO TELL US A BIT MORE...



nybody who has seen the Lorenzos', Marquez', Pedrosas' and Crutchlows' tumbling down the asphalt in MotoGP for the past few years will be aware of Alpinestars Tech-Air racing airbag racing suit. At EICMA the firm showed off their street version for the consumer in the form of a crash test and the perfect visualisation of how their complex technology fires the protective device into life in the blink of an eye.

Airbags are certainly not new. Dainese have their own version through the D-Air and even manufacturers like Ducati have developed garments that inflate a cushioning layer depending on impact (a version was demoed with the Multistrada this year). Bags akin to life vests, and padding that originates from the depths of the motorcycle itself are other ideas and schemes that have been presented in the last twenty years but none have really taken hold as an accepted industry practice and captured the attention of the motorcycling public.

Perhaps it is to do with production cost. Maybe it is a degree of doubt in the system itself. The Tech-Air demonstration was impressively com-

prehensive from a firm with a thorough track record in safety equipment. It gives cause for hope that the materials that stopped the MotoGP World Champion from serious harm after falling at 200kmph+ at Mugello last year can have something like the same effect for riders on the road. The form of their technology – a light, functional and independent 'vest' – is also a factor that could mean a breakthrough for airbags.

"The Milan launch was very significant for Alpinestars because it has been well over a decade of development, time, energy and investment for us, also a huge amount of testing," says Appleton. "So to be able to present it to an audience like that was good news from our point of view. We have long viewed active protection – airbag protection – as a key development for the future of motorcycling. There are always going to be the inevitable issue of people's concern for safety and responsibility in the motorcycling industry and I think this is a good demonstration that the industry itself is investing to make it safer, more acceptable and more accessible."



FEATURE



Alpinestars have the advantage of their exposure through racing, and their mantra of using competition as a test bed for their products also has some links when it comes to Tech-Air. "There is a correlation between the street and racing system but mainly in one part of the software," Appleton explains. "Racing has obviously given us a huge amount of data at high speed and extreme usage. It has also been valuable in the prediction of 'loss of control' situations. The Street system is more wide-ranging however. On the track we don't expect to have too many impact against an object, for example, it is more loss of control, bike against bike or riders sliding or being pitched into a tumble. On the road we are dealing with riders hitting things and often with little notice. The algorithm has been developed specifically for the Street system to cope with situations where the motorcycle is hitting an object and then reacting extremely quickly."

The Tech-Air gives the rider comprehensive protection in a crash by covering the full back, shoulders, kidney areas and chest. It typically detects an impact between 30-60 milliseconds (depending on accident type). Once fired Tech-Air will fully inflate in 25 milliseconds. The exact ins-and-outs of how it works are explained below.

"It will be available in Europe in the spring and one of the things we achieved was to keep the system contained within the equipment you wear so you don't have to modify your motorcycle, you can ride any bike on-road or off-road," Appleton extols. "The only thing you need to do is connect the system itself – which is housed in a vest with a back protector – to the jacket. This is a simple connection and once the outer jacket is zipped up it is ready to go."

"The challenge [for them] is to firstly get the message out that the technology is available and very usable; it is like having a mobile phone effectively, you just have to plug it in and charge it. Although you get twenty-five riding hours out of the charge, so plenty of mileage. We also have to educate people about the potential of the system and what difference it will make."

At 999 pounds and 1195 euros (with another 650 euros/600 pounds or 350/300 depending on which of the two compatible jackets you choose) the Tech-Air is serious gear with a serious price. Although as the old maxim concerning crash helmets goes 'what price do you put on your life?' For commuters and dedicated tourers at least – those with plenty of hours in the saddle – then it will be an investment worth considering. It also seems clear that this is just the beginning of the story when it comes to the Tech-Air outside of exclusive circles of racing, competition and race suits. The system is proven to react and offer a 'barrier' to impact and if it can find a place in the motorcycling market then it can only become even more sophisticated, versatile (fitting in yet more garments), expansive and cheaper.

"It will undoubtedly develop because with all of our products we are always investing and developing," affirms Appleton. "An example is the Tech10 [motocross] boot which has advanced almost on an annual basis since it was launched. I think Tech-Air technology will do the same. This is the starting point and we'll constantly be working on it. We know there is potential to increase the coverage, work on the algorithm and there will be new jackets to be compatible."

Alpinestars also issued a handy Q+A document to the press. Here is the breakdown and information in full:

HOW DOES THE TECH-AIR STREET AIRBAG SYSTEM WORK?

Using sensors situated close to the body, the Tech-Air street airbag system detects a motor-cycle rider and where relevant a passenger's impending loss of control or crash impact and instantaneously deploys an electronically triggered airbag to help prevent injury to the upper body. The system uses a sophisticated algorithm developed for street riding to detect danger with the greatest precision.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR THE AIRBAG TO DEPLOY?

Depending on the type of crash Tech-Air typically detects an impact from between 30-60 milliseconds, and fully inflates its airbag in 25 milliseconds.

FOR WHICH TYPES OF RIDING CAN I WEAR THE TECH-AIR STREET AIRBAG SYSTEM?

Thanks to its unique and innovative design the Tech-Air street airbag system can be used for road/street and off-road adventure touring riding. The system, which incorporates the Airbag Control Unit (ACU) and components, can be used interchangeably with compatible outer jacket models. For the launch two models are available, the Valparaíso For Tech-Air and the Viper For Tech-Air textile jackets. Therefore, by situating the sensors on the rider's body instead of the bike, Tech-Air can be used on ANY terrain, without having to stop to change, deactivate or reconfigure settings.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN YOU TAKE THE TECH-AIR STREET AIRBAG SYSTEM OFF ROAD?

The system is tested and developed for a wide

range of riding scenarios and is capable of handling tough off-road adventuring touring situations. At this stage we are recommending that it is not adopted for use for off road riding with full off-road (knobby) tires. The system is not designed for motocross, rally-raiding and supermoto. It is also not designed for race-track use as the Tech-Air race system exists for that purpose.

CAN I WEAR THE TECH-AIR SYSTEM WITH ANY JACKET?

No, The Tech-Air System must be worn with approved, compatible jacket models. Further compatible street and tour riding textile jacket models will be introduced in future collections.

WHAT PARTS OF THE BODY ARE PROTECTED?

The airbag system gives comprehensive, instant inflatable upper body protection to the back, shoulders, kidney areas and chest.

IS THE TECH-AIR STREET AIRBAG SYSTEM WATERPROOF?

The components and electronic unit of Tech-Air System are designed for use in damp and high humidity environments. The core of the electronic system is completely sealed against water ingress when worn under a compatible jacket, and is perfectly optimized for all-weather riding.

DOES EXTREME HOT OR COLD WEATHER AFFECT PERFORMANCE?

Tech-Air System's airbag and componentry have undergone extensive temperature testing for extreme cold, heat and humidity and are tested to perform between -100C and +500C.

DO YOU OFFER ADDITIONAL SUPPORT AFTER THE PURCHASE OF THE TECH-AIR SYSTEM?

Yes. We have a dedicated online data portal which will provide up-to-date information regarding the airbag. This portal tracks the life of the airbag and provides up-to-the-minute information regarding airbag maintenance (ex: how long servicing will take and costs, etc). A fully trained team of staff from Alpinestars' global dealership network will be available to organize servicing and recharging, as well as help with any queries.

CAN I WEAR A BACKPACK WITH TECH-AIR?

Yes. The system has undergone extensive testing and wearing a backpack is not a problem. Tests were conducted with a backpack containing everyday objects and weighing up to 10 kilograms, which in no way compromised the airbag's performance.

DO I NEED TO REPLACE COMPONENTS AFTER A CRASH?

Following a crash Alpinestars can replace the airbag and inflators. Post-crash the system should be returned for evaluation and assessment from an Alpinestars technician, who will advise the customer of the appropriate next steps.

IS ANY MAINTENANCE OF TECH-AIR REQUIRED?

Tech-Air's ACU is completely seal-protected to ensure security and therefore no maintenance of the ACU is required. Customers are strongly advised to check the LED display on the sleeve for correct indications at the beginning and at the end of every ride. We recommend the system be returned for servicing every two years.

THE TECH-AIR STREET AIRBAG SYSTEM BE CLEANED?

The outer jackets can be washed in accordance with their normal cleaning instructions but the vest cannot be washed. The system can be wiped clean with a damp cloth and avoid contact with strong cleaning agents. During the system's two-year service the system will be dismantled and the vest washed, if required, by Alpinestars.

CAN I SEE THE INTERNAL COMPONENTS INSIDE THE TECH-AIR SYSTEM?

No. The system's ACU is closed with a tamper-proof seal to ensure the integrity and security of the system and there are no user- serviceable parts inside the system.

WHAT CHECKS TO I NEED TO CARRY OUT BEFORE RIDING?

It is recommended that before and after each ride that the customer checks the LED light panel located on the sleeve to ensure all indications are correct. It is at this point that the rider should check that the battery levels on the LED indicate sufficient charge for the ride.

HOW LONG DOES TECH-AIR SYSTEM'S BATTERY LAST?

Once fully charged the battery will last for 25 hours. Like your mobile phone Tech-Air requires regular recharging according to volume of usage. One hour's charging ensures four hours of riding time. When the LED display shows a red indication for low battery, customers need to recharge the system.

IS TECH-AIR EASY TO SWITCH ON?

Yes, Tech-Air is extremely easy to operate. To switch on all that is required is to close the outer jacket's zip and thereafter check the LED display panel on the arm to ensure system is activated correctly.



NO SHO

—
It's not just what you see the moment you need to be at your best, it's that you were passionate enough to spend years of moments chewing up dirt to get there.



RT CUTS

TV MAKES THE DIFFERENCE...

By Adam Wheeler

While working at Valencia for the final round of the 2014 MotoGP series I used the little time there was for interviews at an extremely busy fixture for the teams and paddock to explore a bit more about the patchwork of the series. Although they are two very different beasts I wanted to see if there was any parallels I could draw between MotoGP and MXGP; particularly as the 'exclusivity' trend established in MXGP seems to be taking the sport in a similar direction to its distant cousin. Namely: select entries, cherry-picking talent, longer calendars, reduced teams, and a desire for a more 'glamorous' aesthetic.

All of these changes – as those who follow the scene know – have had an effect on the economic landscape and potential of MXGP and the very ethos of Grand Prix. When it comes to riders (the heart of what can make MXGP so captivating, especially because they still have so much say compared to the technical depths of MotoGP) then Darwin's 'natural selection' assertions are sharper than ever: the best earn more, the good struggle, the slightly slower, injured or afflicted find their already short career prospects diminishing rapidly in Grand Prix. It has always been like this but maybe not so extreme and in a time when motorsport generally seems to be stressed for rosy health. And very few earn salaries proportionate to the risks they take. Then there are those that reach the age of 23...

The story will appear in the next issue – the last issue of 2014 – but it is clear that Dorna spin every plate in the MotoGP paddock. They have been called meddlesome (with the rules), power-hungry, cash-hungry and short sighted, but they are also the ultimate preservers of a championship that has negotiated the tight curves through the end of tobacco sponsorship

and the financial crisis. They take MotoGP to the remote climes of Argentina and abroad to Japan, Malaysia and Australia for a month away from Europe every single year but they organise the freight and carry the show. When I asked Monster Energy Yamaha Tech3 boss Herve Poncharal if he thought Dorna were important for a team's survival in the paddock then he said they were "essential" and can even top up a team's budget if they were missing the final numbers. The Frenchman's explanation of how to run and fund a MotoGP satellite squad at the top level was both fascinating and frightening and made me realise on what a knife edge motorcycle racing can balance, even in the apparent 'luxury' of MotoGP. There might be different beliefs to how the sport is run but there is a degree of unity.

For Dorna it might not be desirable and surely hits their profit margins (maybe their support would not be needed in an ideal world of rich, copious sponsors) but their backing of the teams has to happen in order to deliver the 'product' that will fill and enrich their TV contracts. This is the key difference to MXGP where Youthstream cannot count on anything like the same market or clout for TV earning power for MX. Dorna can rely on circuit fees, sponsors and TV deals. Youthstream have to look more towards circuit fees and sponsors. They need staff to try and invest in improving the image of the sport and make it more marketable and they need a decent TV production as part of that appeal. They cannot reduce costs significantly without being perceived to have taken a 'step backwards' with MXGP. We see the YS crew week-in week-out and these people are working around the clock.

Like MotoGP, MXGP presumably earn decent coin from the QMMF for staging the opening



race of the year under the lights of Losail but whispers in the paddock say that the fee props up other Grands Prix that are not so reliable in Europe. Monster Energy have renewed as principal sponsors for another two years and this is a major source of income for the championship. Like the teams, promoters are at the whim of the reliability of sponsors, some more dependable than others.

MXGP is an 'earthy' discipline but it is expensive to run at a high level due to the set-up costs of a single weekend at often-temporary venues. MotoGP rolls into a permanent and approved facility, plugs in and starts a systematic build (albeit one with an army of local employees at the circuit). There is also a well-worn process of marketing and ticket sales for each Grand Prix; an event like the Dutch TT has been part of the calendar ever since the first championship in 1949. I've heard comments about the number of staff Youthstream employ in relation to the perceived size of the sport and I've no idea if the promoters really are overloaded at the top-end but it seems to be clear that they cannot create the show they want, create a profit like any business and emerge from a championship year with a balanced budget sheet without levying a service charge on the teams. This charge is apparently justified through allocation of passes (in contrast teams in AMA SX allegedly have to pay for each ticket) and dedicated TV spots to assist in their marketing activities. Youthstream succour the teams with a percentage of freight support to the overseas races but the trips to Qatar, Thailand, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and USA (in all three stints abroad from European bases) still punch a whole in the planning of European squads that are mostly funded by European sponsors and cash.

Prize money is almost a forgotten concept for FIM disciplines that cannot count on a TV cash-cow and it is hard to imagine it lasting much longer in AMA SX or MX unless it is hard preserved as a point of principal (well done for that if so). Youthstream rightly or wrongly have looked inside the sport to make MXGP work and satisfy their criteria, and hopefully they are

also hard-searching outside for new partners that might be pricked by the Villopoto-Cairolì dynamic (if we are talking 2015 and short-term). The thought of riders paying to enter Grand Prix creates a bad taste and bad PR, and although teams range in their professionalism the outfits that have been part of the paddock for a significant amount of time and those that especially do not bank on factory support have to be cherished in order for a solid GP platform to exist. Youngsters still need to look at MXGP as the ultimate test and for desirable saddles to be reachable and obtainable without bringing a slice of their own sponsorship, which is now the overwhelming case in MotoGP/Moto3 (confirmed by another interview at Valencia).

What is the solution for Youthstream then to try and fill a TV money void and to ease the pressure on teams and their budgets? Obviously they need sponsors like Monster Energy and to expand their portfolio where possible (Tag Heuer was added in 2014). How do they do that? Again by making the a fist of things on TV, sprucing up the paddock, heading to accessible locations, employing staff with healthy contact books. There must be a profit for YS in MXGP but it makes little business sense for them to skim money by risking the health and future of Grand Prix and – like I've outlined – there are signs of hefty investment, especially with the move to film the races in HD. Unless of course the championship is being nicely bow-tied to be sold. Who knows? Youthstream simply cannot take the teams around the world like Dorna and I know they have helped squads and riders in the paddock so their omnipotence does not border on the ruthless. There does seem to be a 'them and us' feeling in corners of MXGP and I didn't pick this up so much in MotoGP as IRTA fills a admirable buffer role between the parties.

Perhaps there is a lot to be said for unity. With the FIM confirming a new CMS President in the form of Tony Skillington until 2019 then the way MXGP looks and feels could shift and in a way where the 'group' could make lives easier for all involved.

THE NEW

AFTER 31 EDITIONS OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS SUPERCROSS EVENT AWAY FROM NORTH AMERICAN SHORES THE SUPERCROSS PARIS BERCY HAS FOUND A NEW HOME IN THE SPLENDID TWO YEAR OLD STADE PIERRE MAUROY IN LILLE. WE ALL KNOW THAT GEICO HONDA'S ELI TOMAC WAS NAPOLEONIC WITH HIS CONQUEST OF THE 2014 INCARNATION OF THE RACE TWO WEEKS AGO, BUT WHAT OF THE FUTURE FOR 'BERCY'? WE GRABBED WORDS WITH TWO IMPORTANT FIGURES FROM THE BUSY TEAM BEHIND THE SPECTACLE...



SUPERCROSS PARIS LILLE

W STAGE

By Adam Wheeler

Photos by Monster Energy/Nuno Laranjeira





Europe's most important supercross race lost its claustrophobia a fortnight ago. The noise, fumes and intensity of the Palais Omnisports Arena de Bercy was replaced with the clean and modern expanses of the Stade Pierre Mauroy, home of LOSC Lille Football Club and complete with retractable roof and a movable floor. OK, the surroundings were nondescript compared to the heartbeat of Paris and a scenic location next to the river Seine but surely the point was about activities within the stadium.

'SXB' had moved through necessity as the original venue – that tends to host many top concert acts as well in the French capital – was undergoing renovation. It did seem a little strange that in the one hundred square kilometre radius of urban Paris with its population

of more than fourteen million inhabitants that another suitable location could not be found. Instead a trip over two hundred kilometres north to Lille meant a significant transplantation.

"We needed a stadium as big as Bercy or even bigger," explains Lariviere Organisation President Sophie Casasnovas – who oversees the race and also other events like the Bol D'or Endurance – referring to the 11,000 capacity. "As the race happens in November we needed a place that was covered. This was the only stadium. There are two or three other arenas [in Paris] but they are smaller than Bercy. This was the biggest and best with a roof and also located in a great area of France for motocross. So we said 'OK, let's go'."



SUPERCROSS PARIS LILLE

“The next challenge was with communications,” she adds. “Paris is very central and now we had to bring everybody to Lille. We found that spectators were coming from this area of France but also Belgium and the UK. Regarding the crowd we have like 20% of people from Paris and then from this zone and other areas of France.”

“We went from medium to large; it is a Bercy on steroids,” claims Eric Peronnard, legendary promoter and one of the long-term ‘movers’ behind the event’s success. “Bercy’s magic is Paris. It is not the stadium, and that is something that money cannot buy. Even if we moved to the Stade du France [the country’s famous national site] it wouldn’t have been the event like we know it. It is like being in a U.S stadium here and it is not the cultural experience like it would be in Paris. But, as long as you do a good job then it will be successful. That’s the most positive thing. It is not connected to a building. If it is a good show then people will come.”

The logistics challenges then began to make sure that the SXBP would morph into ‘SXPL’ without losing any of the ingredients or the flavour that had brought the public to Paris on a prolific basis for the better part of thirty years.

“The most difficult part was the technical side because the stadium is bigger,” Ms Casasnovas continues. “We had to build a bigger track with more dirt. To find, store and bring that dirt from an area in the north of France was something new. We also had to protect the floor. The stadium is very modern and there is a big infrastructure for the football team. We had to put five layers of protection on the floor before we could build the track, which is not something we had to worry about at Bercy. It was more complicated. We worked with Jean-Luc Fouchet and he has a great team and I believe the riders like the track.”

And come they did. Lille was full on Saturday. The event programme was also less laborious with a two day schedule compared to the three traditionally held in Paris. The stands were almost as busy on Sunday afternoon. The running time was still traditionally late and there is far too much waffle around the opening ceremony but Lille presented more floor space (although no tunnel runs that characterise the Bercy layouts) and more possibilities for the track in terms of design and width compared to the right inclines of Bercy. Walking around the guts of the stadium to reach the paddock from the press room revealed a superbly built and state of the art structure. Atmosphere was still generated into this example of what many now call ‘soulless modern football stadia’ thanks to the French (and northern European) fans, the lights, smoke and hype of supercross.





“Oh man, it is always shocking,” said JGR Yamaha’s Justin Barcia, a rider who won at Bercy in 2014 and seemed to have little qualms about the venue switch. “You kinda remember it [the vibe] from last year but it’s still crazy. There are so many cool fans here and it is amazing to see so many. I did an Alpinestars dealer signing nearby on Friday night and it was mind-blowing how many were there; I’ve never seen a fan base like that. This is what is it all about that’s why we come here, to put on a good show.”

“It was a great first night,” says Peronnard. “We didn’t have any major issues and the place sold out. It is not Paris and we know that. For me it is a bit like the Belgian MXGP leaving Namur. It is not going to be the same and this will not be ‘Bercy’ but the new place is doing a great job. The track is good, the dirt is a bit on the soft side but we are in northern France in November so it is difficult to get dry earth. This is just to explain to people who feel that the track is quite rutted. You cannot dry dirt, it is one of those things. Anyway, to me, what this event shows is that supercross is strong in France and it doesn’t matter where you go.”

The major part of the aesthetic that people noticed from Lille’s inauguration was the large black drapes that sliced the stadium in half and gave a slightly drab backdrop to the race action. This was a result of one of the compromises in coming to the Stade Pierre Mauroy.

“You know, we did not choose to leave Paris,” states Peronnard. “It was not an option to stay. It is like we did not choose to use half of the stadium here. It is built in a certain way and the track is where the tennis court goes. It can be raised to cope with resistance. A lot of people are looking at us going ‘you cheap bastards’ but we didn’t have a choice. We did the best that was humanly possible considering that a year ago we did not know it would be.”



he track itself seemed a little kinder for overtaking compared to Bercy’s endure-esque windings but the dash through the tunnels in Paris was unique and even the likes of Tomac lamented the loss of being able to “open it up a bit” at Lille. This feature could make a return and it seems SXPL is set for further shape-shifting. At least for 2015 where it will definitely be at the same location.

“We have different ideas for next year,” says Ms Casasnovas. “This was our first edition and we needed to get to know the facility. It is bigger for the track but also for all the access points. It means twice the amount of spectators compared to Bercy. We have done many Bercys without the ‘corridors’. Also here we could find another way to make the show bigger. It depends on the final reaction and whether the spectators liked it. The feedback will determine if it stays, goes back to Paris or somewhere else in France.”

SUPERCROSS PARIS LILLE



Ray Archer pic



There was talk two weeks ago of the supercross leaving Bercy for good. Allegedly the powers-that-be at the Palais Omnisports arena are not big bike fans. Lariviere were, understandably, non-committal on whether Bercy's days were done. Casasnovas: "Bercy is under renovation for two years so we have an agreement in that time with Lille. After 2015 we really don't know. We are still in contact with Bercy. We can go back there but not in the same conditions as before. It will be a choice we have to make."

"I don't think it is a big deal to change," she concludes. "It has been a challenge. We own the Supercross Paris label and it is famous outside of America and I think we can demonstrate that the show – whether it is in Paris or Lille – is the same."

Star draw Americans like Barcia, Tomac, Brayton, Hill and Peick were not dissuaded by SXPL's departure from Paris where the race's presence obviously carries extra vacation value. Crucially – and in spite of miserable weather on Sunday – the enthusiasm for the meeting was not dampened. The reaction was re-assuring for the French and a positive signal for Europe's willingness to receive supercross in the right conditions and with the right 'cast' of athletes. It might take 2015 to see if the previous event relied solely on the reputation built in Paris but judging by the feeling around the Stade Pierre Mauroy from the parties involved there is a future for SXPL and perhaps for a resurrection of the idea of the sport making a long overdue expansion across the continent as a legitimate series.

"Could there be more races? I'd like to think so," says Peronnard. "Supercross has been on a slippery slope for some years in Europe. 75% of the people here did not go to Bercy. [Races in] Barcelona, Munich...? I think this event shows that people want to see it."





TOMAC SPEAKS:

ELI'S WORDS POST RACE AND BEFORE HEADING TO ITALY TO CONQUER THE GENOVA SX AS WELL

So you are the new King of Lille but perhaps 'Conqueror' or 'Dictator' would be more appropriate for your dominance...

I like 'Dictator', that would be sweet! It was good. My starts were there all week and you cannot beat being comfortable on the bike. That was something I struggled with a little bit back in the States. It was good to come over here and practice and get a lot of race starts, as well as take some confidence back over. It was good to bring the family over and we're gonna go and check out Venice for a couple of days now.

What spec were you running on the Honda?

The motor was a '14 and most of the Honda stuff is similar. We don't have our '15 stuff together yet. We had it at Monster Cup but the bike had already gone [been freighted] so this was '14 spec.

You're feeling better now after coming here a bit sick?

I had a head cold. Now I feel pretty good but yesterday and the day before...I was blowing snot through hundreds of Kleenex for three days. It was terrible and super-annoying.

Your wheelie through the dragon-back was worth half a second a lap...it was impressive...

I think it was a little quicker. It got the fans fired up and it was fun to do anyway.

Thoughts on coming back to Lille again?

Yeah, I'd like it. Last year I thought 'I'd like to have some time off' because we do race twenty-nine weekends in America but I guess I'm an ADD guy because I was getting bored at home. It is a good way to break up the schedule instead of pounding laps out. It cleans the mind.



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THE EASY LIFE...?

By Steve Matthes

I sit here in the SAS Airlines lounge in Helsinki wrapping up my ten day European SX trip. It's been four years since I've been in Europe for this long and truthfully, I can't wait to get home. It's like that for everyone right? Nothing is ever as good as your home bed and the comforts that one enjoys with that. No matter where you live.

Still, I'm thankful that a guy like me gets the opportunity to come to these overseas races each year. I'm positive that if you could go back in time and ask a 15-year old super-fan of motocross in Canada named Steve Matthes if he ever thought that he would be able to go to one or two (nevermind twenty or thirty) European supercross races, he would've called the cops on you. So yes, I realize I'm fortunate and it's always great to see a new country (Finland) that I've never been to before. But get me out of here and to the USA!

With that in mind, here are some thoughts from the Lille SX and this past weekend's race in Helsinki...

-First of all, any discussion about Lille has to start and end with GEICO Honda's Eli Tomac. The man was on fire and swept everything both nights in the new venue that was Lille. BTOS-ports KTM's Justin Brayton led a couple of laps in one of Sunday's main events but other than that, be it main events, Superpole or elimination races, Tomac won everything.

And although I wasn't there this past weekend Tomac made it two for two in sweeping Genoa, Italy also. There's plenty of talk about who's going to win the now-vacated supercross title

and most of it surrounds RCH Suzuki's Kenny Roczen and Red Bull KTM's Ryan Dungey with Tomac or Honda's Trey Canard being thought of as spoilers, or they fall under the category of 'riders we think could go either way'. I'm here to tell you that Tomac crushed everyone in Lille and guys like Brayton, JGR Yamaha's Justin Barcia (thoughts go out to him after a bad crash in Genoa) and Weston Peick are no joke. I know there's a danger in thinking too much about a couple of European supercross results in the middle of winter but Tomac was THAT good in Lille that I think you're going to have to move him up into a very real discussion about whether he could win his first ever 450SX race in 2015 and capture the title.

-Most of you reading this know that Lille took the place of Bercy Supercross which had been held in Paris since 1984 and due to renovations of the arena, Lille was now the new spot. And if the rumors are to be believed, this race may never go back to Bercy. Lille is a much newer arena, holds more people, the city has all the amenities and the people up in the northern area of France are very much into racing of all types. And they packed the stands for two nights with the total attendance of both nights surpassing the Bercy arena which held three nights.

Word is dealing with the Bercy people isn't the easiest while Lille were more than happy to have the race. Combined with simple economics I think we will see more of Lille in the future. I enjoyed it very much but (and there's always a but right?) there was no doubt with the arena being newer and the fans being further away from the track surface the atmosphere and the ambiance of Bercy was lacking. There's some-



thing to be said for the tiny Bercy facility with the fans right on top of you and acting out of control. I got the feeling at Lille that everyone was well behaved while being in Bercy sometimes was scary and exhilarating all at once. Oh well, all things must come to an end right?

-This past weekend, while Tomac and Barcia were in Genoa, I got invited up to Helsinki for the Tampere SX, a city a couple of hours from the Finnish capital. Lacking the big names and big lights of Lille or Genova, Tampere still had some very talented riders and the weekend reminded me that there are guys all over the world that haven't given up the dream. Harri Kullas, a Finn who's been racing the GP's for a while cleaned house both nights but really only because of bad luck for Frenchman Boris Maillard. Maillard was very quick and Kullas' equal, but first turn crashes or small mistakes held him back. I went to the race with my buddy Jason Thomas who hung up the boots for good two years ago but the organizers came calling so he suited up once again. Once a racer, always a racer right?

Thomas was top five speed but some crashes on Sunday held him back and I think he realized that with guys he could beat a couple of years ago now turning the page on him, his career is really over. Nevertheless we had good time (well Thomas wasn't having fun after the Mains) and it was a fun race. And with a Finn winning it, the small but enthusiastic crowd left happy.

There is lots of downtime at these races and so you wander around and talk to other riders and their pit crews. It just struck me that one week ago I was in Lille talking to Tomac, Barcia etc

and these are riders that are in high-demand and able to get 30 to 50 thousand dollars to just show up and race - not to mention first class plane tickets for them and their entourages. Seven days later I'm in Finland talking to Maillard or Australian Garen Stapleton who came from a supercross race in Germany last weekend (the ADAC SX series has long been a staple for riders on the fringes of stardom) to Finland for expenses paid and just purse money. Maillard, Stapleton and a few others were riders that I hadn't really heard of - I've seen the names here or there - and here they were, a long way from home and racing to try and make a living.

And they're all great riders. Chances are that any one of the top five or six at this race in Finland are faster than 90% of the other racers in the world - they're just not on a Tomac or Barcia level. It just struck me that all over the world at any given time there are some racers that are toughing it out to try and make some money doing what they love. And just like with the Villopotos, Tomacs or whomever the BS in the pits revolves around who's dating whom or what this team did to this racer or what have you. There are just some things universal to racers no matter what the age or tax bracket.

So Lille Supercross for me two weeks ago, Finland this past weekend, one weekend at home in the USA and then I'm off to Canada for the final round of their arenacross series. It's not always fun and sometimes a lot of work but looking back on where I've come from, the 15-year old Canadian superfan wouldn't have believed it.

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